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Beyond Prison Walls: A Case Study

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Abstract: *This study was an investigation into adolescent male's perception of parenting styles and their ability to cope with problematic experiences and attachment to parents/caregivers and peers, with emphasis on one inmate (WC) in particular, who was the subject of a case study. All of the adolescents in this study were all at-risk for incarceration given their problem behavior and prior affiliation with the juvenile justice system with the exception of WC, who spent sixteen years in prison. Study participants subjects were administered the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ), the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) and the Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (A-COPE). Study findings revealed correlations between parenting style, attachment and coping for adolescents with a history of incarceration or those who are at-risk for incarceration. Likewise, a solid attachment to a parental figure, a healthy personal constitution and an array of social supports can significantly reduce recidivism and can be very instrumental in one's adjustment to society post incarceration.*

Purpose of Study

While many factors contribute to an individual's ability to cope with problematic situations, this paper is based on the supposition that there are various identifiable factors that contribute to inmates' adjustment to prison, their eventual release from the penal system, and these individuals' successful adjustment to society beyond prison. This study focuses on the experiences of incarcerated youth, with specific emphasis on one inmate, in particular, who was remanded to one of New York City's most infamous jails, *Rikers Island*, and later transferred to an upstate (New York) correctional facility to serve 16 years of a 15-30 year sentence for attempted murder. Hence, this young man, otherwise referred to as WC for the purposes of this paper, entered prison at age 15 and was released into the "world" for the very first time, at thirty-one- years-old.

Problem

In 1993, typically, adolescents who were arrested and incarcerated were usually released within one to five years of arrest; few were subjected to the kind of extensive prison term or institutionalization that WC experienced (Henderson, 2001). For the adolescent serving brief prison terms, with prior limited or unsuccessful school experiences, few options are open to them. Since the educational system in many juvenile and adult facilities is poorly structured, it is expected that many of these individuals will not make advances in education by the time they are released. Thus, the likelihood of school being seen as a viable option for these persons' adjustment within prison and beyond is poor (Henderson, 2001). In addition, the prospects for those adolescents who desire to work once released from jail are generally met with resistance by prospective employers due to the risks that adolescents pose because of their prior arrest and incarceration history. In the case of WC, he had little to no schooling experiences by the time he

was arrested. WC's reading and math abilities were poor and his interest in academics was virtually non-existent. However, what our subject had going for himself was a solid constitution and strong sense of self; an externalized locus of control and a healthy internalized family value system, in spite of being a part of a dysfunctional and fragmented family; perseverance and a profound desire to succeed in life that existed even prior to him going to prison; a supportive network in the facility and in the larger community and focused imagery on being successful in life beyond prison, which never waned during WC's sixteen-year stint in prison.

Within our society, the family is considered to be the context where individuals first learn to interact with others and where they develop insights about relationships. It is also within the family context that children learn the lessons needed for appropriate socialization. For example, learning to share, to trust, and to be patient, begins during the early childhood years. These lessons are generally taught within the context of the home and are reinforced at school, church and/or other cultural/social institutions. In the case of WC, he learned quite early that family was important and the need to be loyal towards family members. This important family value was reinforced for our subject while he was in prison. Ironically, WC learned, quite early in his prison stint, that loyalty to others was highly valued and to be counted on would serve him well amongst his peers. Critical to our subject's ability to be counted upon was his ability to discern right from wrong and to feel remorse for his actions. One's ability to feel remorse for wrongful acts committed has been linked to having higher levels of empathy and is often indicative of broader aspects of behavior that may include a greater ability to be flexible in one's thinking.

Many urban youth are faced with the realities of negotiating the rigorous concrete jungles of the urban city and must travel streets littered with drugs, prostitution, violence and crime. Due to their plight of poverty, many youth do not have the support of their families on which to depend. Much of the negative behavior many of us hear about in correctional facilities are the result of aggressive stances taken by inmates who are very distrustful and fearful of each other—and who feel that they have no hope of establishing or re-establishing a future for themselves and/or their families. Thus, they become desensitized to feeling a part of a group, a larger body that is greater than they are as individuals. In many instances, the credo for survival in prison becomes: strike out at others before they strike out at you. With regard to WC, he tried, earnestly, to maintain family contact before his incarceration and befriended others who would offer support to him while he was incarcerated. When no support was available to him in prison, WC elicited that support by writing letters to supportive individuals outside of prison, which showcased his utmost enthusiasm for life as well as his new found love for education. Adolescents, who have not been given appropriate skills or supports by significant adults within their lives, view the daily assaults they endure as normal activity and in many ways find the assaults exciting. As a result, they find ways to become repeatedly involved in similar activities. Adolescent boys who live in many urban communities begin to perceive these experiences, once seen as exciting, as a necessary way of life within the urban jungle. The focus on day to day activity in the prison becomes important to the inmate. However, for WC, his focus remained steadfast on life beyond the prison walls—possible employment options and the need to prove to his family and others that he was fully rehabilitated, etc. Simply put, WC was not invested in returning to prison.

Research Questions

1. What is the quality of at-risk youth's social relationships prior to incarceration and at-risk youth's tendency to either accept or reject the prisoner code during incarceration? 2. Upon an inmate's eventual release from prison, what are the essential elements that must exist in the individual's social context that are instrumental in mitigating recidivism and assisting the individual in becoming a contributing member of society?

Research Methodology

Using a series of evaluative tools, (i.e., Parental Authority Questionnaire {P.A.Q.}; Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA) and Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (A-COPE)); anecdotal notes and letter writing analysis, this study is an investigation into the quality of at-risk youths social relationships prior to incarceration, their adjustment while in prison and one inmate's ability to thrive outside of prison walls. The P.A.Q and the IPPA assess parenting styles and parent and peer attachment, respectively. A-COPE is designed to measure the behaviors that adolescents find helpful in managing problems and difficult situations.

Research Findings

Overall, study findings revealed correlations between parenting style, attachment and coping for adolescent males who have a history of incarceration or who are at-risk for incarceration. Findings from the study yield that parenting style can affect the adolescent's ability to cope with problems that he may encounter. Finally, the healthy attachment of an inmate to his parents can significantly influence how the individual will potentially relate to others during incarceration and is one major determining factor as to how the individual will adjust to society post incarceration.

References

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